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INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 6027  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 9833  
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RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 3503  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA  
RUACAAA/COMUSKOREA INTEL SEOUL KOR  
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR  
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000895

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TAGS: [KS](#) [KN](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)  
SUBJECT: SUICIDE IN KOREA: ROH'S DEATH IN CONTEXT

REF: A. SEOUL 00821  
[1](#)B. SEOUL 00823  
[1](#)C. SEOUL 00853

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The May 23 suicide of former President Roh Moo-hyun sparked a public outpouring of grief seemingly disproportionate to the man's popularity -- he left office in February 2008 with approval ratings of only 28 percent. Roh, who touted himself as a corruption-free politician, shocked supporters and opponents alike in admitting in March that his wife had indeed accepted funds from a Busan businessman. In death, however, Roh has revamped his image. Far from proving his guilt, Roh's suicide has become the stuff of legends, even of martyrs. The reaction of the Korean public stems in large part from the country's history of suicide as a form of protest. Beginning in 1970 until as recently as last month, ardent Korean protesters have killed themselves as a means of highlighting injustice and mobilizing supporters. Regardless of Roh's real motivation in taking his life, for many Koreans his death was reminiscent of suicide protests during the democracy movement -- in which Roh played an active role -- and highlighted the injustice of the prosecutor's investigation and the allegedly increasingly authoritarian bent of the current administration. END SUMMARY.

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An All-to-Common Phenomenon  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) The Republic of Korea, as of 2009, had the highest suicide rate of any OECD country. While most developed countries have experienced a decline in suicide since the 1970s, Korea is one of a handful of countries in which the rate continues to climb, showing a sharp increase starting with the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Scholars attribute the rise in suicides primarily to social factors -- lack of a social safety net, growing income inequality, and weakening social integration. Older Koreans (above the age of 75) are ten times more likely to commit suicide than young people (aged 15-24). Celebrity suicide is also relatively common. In the last year several well-known actresses have taken their own lives.

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History of Suicide Protest  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) Suicide has also been a powerful form of protest in

Korea. In 1970, Chun Tae-il, a twenty-two year old garment worker, immolated himself on the street to protest working conditions and wages. His suicide became a pivotal event and brought labor issues to the attention of student activists arguing for liberal democracy, a movement that had, until then, existed mainly on the philosophical level. Between 1970 and 2004, 107 Koreans died from the act of suicide protest. Self-immolation was the predominant form of protest representing 73 percent (78 people) of the total. Other protestors threw themselves from buildings (11), hanged themselves (8), drank poison (6), or disembowled themselves (3). Although the trend has slowed, on April 30 the head of the Korea Cargo Transport Workers' Union Gwangju Chapter took his own life to protest the firing of 76 delivery drivers. The suicide note he left his wife said, "We must win the dark fight."

14. (C) Scholarship on the topic contends that the use of suicide protest is primarily a means of communication intended to challenge the government morally and awaken public consciousness. The act of suicide is the ultimate gesture of denial of the existing political and economic systems. Such a dire act conveys the depth of the individual's sense of injustice and compels the community to avenge the deceased. In Korea, such protests seem to have a certain appeal and have often been at least partially successful in mobilizing supporters. In the Confucian tradition, which has had a profound influence on Korean culture, death for moral justice is considered praiseworthy, which perhaps has provided another incentive for such suicides.

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Comment  
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15. (C) In Roh's case, it is clear from Roh's suicide note that his intent was not to protest the prosecutors' investigation into his family finances. Why he felt driven to such extreme measures remains a mystery, although many analysts have pointed to deep depression as the likely cause; certainly references in Roh's suicide note to his inability to sleep, eat or read books seem to support this. The scale of public grief over Roh's death belies the low approval ratings and public censure Roh experienced during the end of his term. Nevertheless his suicide has provoked public outrage at the Lee Administration and the prosecutors. It also prompted calls for more protests, which have been largely blocked by the impressive police presence deployed before, during, and after the funeral. Consequently, Roh's death fulfilled goals similar to those of suicide protests -- it demonstrated his unjust treatment and mobilized supporters to oppose the government.  
STEPHENS